DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 099 CS 214 984

AUTHOR Clark, Gregory
TITLE Discourse at the Boundaries of Community.
PUB DATE 1995-03-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College composition and communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Community; *Discourse Communities; Higher Education; *Metaphors; *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Theory; Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS Public Discourse; *Rhetorical Strategies

ABSTRACT

James Davison Hunter's solution to the dialectical impass of the culture wars is disappointing. He proposes that participants in the discourse grant openly both the "sacredness" of the positions held by the opposing others and the fallibility of their own: that they ground their interaction on a prior consent to compromise. That solution is unsatisfactory because it circumscribes discourse within boundaries that exclude participants who do not grant the consent required. A good way to reconceptualize collectivity and the relational project of discursive exchange that it maintains is to shift the metaphor used to locate it and ourselves within it. What if the discursive project of rhetorical exchange were seen as an enactment of a journey rather than a community, as a transitory and somewhat disorienting trip across space? Mary Louise Pratt, who has experimented with the conceptual possibilities of the traveler, has come up with concept of the contact zone, which she first articulated in contrast to the "safe house." By traditional definition, dialectic is the discourse of safe houses that have been called communities--homogeneous, sovereign units. People may need those communities, but they also need an alternative dialectic to be used to constitute an alternative collectivity in the shared spaces they increasingly must cross together, spaces that the boundaries of consensus and prior commitment to compromise do not and should not circumscribe. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 461 099

Gregory Clark
English Department
Brigham Young University
(gregory_clark@byu.edu)
(801) 378-3581

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
G) Clark
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CCCC, March 1995

(Note: this is a paper in transition--I have rarely presented work that is yet so fluid. When I publish a version of this, I might contradict much of what I've written below)

Discourse at the Boundaries of Community

In my attempts to theorize ethical writing, I have argued persistently for a dialectical conception of its rhetoric--specifically, for a concept of writing that values primarily its cooperative function in a process of discursive exchange. In doing so, I have treated writing that functions in primarily competitive ways as rhetorically unethical to the extent that it undermines human relationships of commonality and equality. Implicit in this argument is a definition of dialectic, as functionally, a relationship of cooperative conflict that is enacted in a discursive exchange through which people who must live and work together determine the terms of their collectivity. So defined, dialectic makes conflicts cooperative by exposing for mutual examination and negotiation the differences that divide its participants. The problem is that my limiting of ethical rhetorical practice to participation in this kind of dialectical exchange draws boundaries, and I must locate participants who do not consent, finally, to compromise their positions, for that is what cooperation must eventually entail, outside them. These boundaries circumscribe what I have called the discourse of community, and in doing so, they mark the ethical lines that inscribe the boundaries of community itself. Do I really want to argue that? I'm not sure that I do anymore, and what follows begins for me a project of reconceiving a dialectical rhetoric and, with it, an ethical collectivity.

Though we think of dialectic as a confrontation of differences, I want to suggest that there is in this concept an underlying consent to compromise that assumes a need to draw such boundaries and enforce them. Recently, Victor Vitanza addressed this using Michel Serres's notion of "the excluded third." Quoting Serres:

> Dialectic makes the two interlocutors play on the same side: they do battle together to produce a truth on which they can agree, that is, to produce a successful communication. In a certain sense, they struggle together against the demon, against the third man. (197)

When Vitanza asks about the consequence of "this exclusion," he answers himself by suggesting that the consequence is "a city/*polis* (like an ideal republic)" that, quoting Serres, "is 'maximally purged of noise.' (Or maximally purged of ethical-political resistance!)" (197-98). Vitanza's conclusion, that this "strategy of excluding the third is a strategy of dialectic (212), suggests to me that dialectic, as traditionally conceived, *is* the discourse of community because its purpose, eventually, is to inscribe discursively the boundaries of belief and value that circumscribe it. That is the problem with this

CS214454

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

conception of dialectic as the discourse of community: it simply cannot accommodate nor even acknowledge the presence of those who do not consent, eventually and in some form, to agree.

James Davison Hunter's analysis of recent public discourse in the United States, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Basic 1991) demonstrates that failure. This book presents his analysis of a failed dialectic, one that fails at the point where the boundary marked by consent to compromise is, by one of its interlocutors, crossed. The title, *Culture Wars*, supplemented by the subtitle, "Making sense of the battles over the family, art, education, law, and politics," identify precisely enough, I think, the dialectic Hunter describes. In Hunter's analysis, public discussion of shared beliefs and values in this national community has reached an impasse as some participants have located the positions of others outside the parameters of potential compromise. In making this judgment, they cancel their consent to compromise, and thus to cooperate with those others as members of the same collectivity. In doing so, they have claimed separate ethical ground: cooperation, because of the compromise it entails, is no longer the paradigm of ethical action but, rather, inherently unethical because, to them, ethical action must now take the form of defending a particular principle. In their assertions that follow, that principle itself demarcates the boundaries of their community, *at least as they imagine it*, boundaries they have drawn between themselves and those with whom they cannot imagine themselves in collectivity. And that is the basic problem with the concept of community: it is always imagined. Specifically, people imagine community, in Benedict Anderson's important argument, as a collectivity that is, in his words, "inherently limited and sovereign," and is characterized ethically by interactions of a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (6-7). Simply put, however diverse and divergent of its empirical referents might be, the concept of community prompts images of autonomy and expectations of homogeniety. When Hunter locates the dialectical impasse of this public discourse in the distance that divides the divergent images and expectations of a US national community imagined by its participants, he illustrates my point, one derived from Anderson. Anderson's point is that the concept of nation is inadequate to the need for concepts of interdependent collectivity that nations now face together ; mine is that the concept of community is inadequate to our need for concepts of ethical discourse that encompasses people who fundamentally differ and yet must share the same space.

In her essay, "Linguistic Utopias," Mary Louise Pratt adapts Anderson's political critique to this question about ethical discourse. Her specific concern is the concept of "speech community," and the critique of that concept that she offers there applies to our concept of "discourse community." Both prompt terms prompt images, in her words, of "discrete, sovereign, social entities," and expectations of "fraternity, equality, or liberty" (50). In other words, both concepts entail the imagination of a stable and coherent collectivity of equals bound together, regardless of conflicts, by their consent to compromise. Pratt's concern is that such a concept leads theorists in her field to imagine a "linguistics of community"--for theorists in ours, a "rhetoric of community"--each of which is, in her words, "a utopian project that postulates unified, idealized social worlds" (58) defined by an "ideology of authenticity" that renders identity, whether personal or collective, as something that is somehow fixed and autonomous (59). Her alternative is

to point theorists toward a "linguistics that decentered community, that placed at its center the operation of language *across* lines of social differentiation...that focused on how speakers constitute each other relationally and in difference..." (60). In terms of our discipline, the alternative is to work toward a rhetoric that would decenter individual and collective identity by driving discourse across the boundaries that circumscribe cooperating communities and out into a transient space she calls contact zones. My interest is to do that by relocating the interaction of dialectical exchange from the bounded and be eiged place that the term *community* prompts us to imagine, to more transitory images of collectivity in order to find a ways to acknowledge and include in it and its discourse some of those with whom we may never be able to agree.

Given that interest, I find Hunter's solution to the dialectical impasse of the culture wars disappointing. He proposes that participants in this discourse grant openly both the "sacredness" of the positions held by opposing others and the fallibility of their own: that they ground their interaction upon a prior consent to compromise. That solution disappoints me because it circumscribes this discourse within boundaries that exclude participants who do not grant that consent. But that is because Hunter's imagination of a US national community is limited by a concept of dialectic that I am looking for a way to revise. The limitations of this concept are articulated by Martha Nussbaum, in her examination of Aristotle's rhetoric as an ethical practice, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge 1986). When conflicts in the substance of a dialectical exchange cannot be resolved, when participants cannot change their positions to accommodate conflicting others--when substantive compromise fails, there is a possibility for a formal resolution that remains. In lieu of agreement, writes Nussbaum, interlocutors can ask each other "to accept our fellowship" (253)--a consent that enacts, if not articulates a kind of compromise. But what happens when *that* offer is refused? Essentially, killing happens, whether in Kenneth Burke's figurative sense of that term or in the more literal. Hunter documents in the discourse of culture wars an intensifying pattern of such refusals, refusals by and refusals of people who still must share the space of a this national culture. Such refusals mark the place in that space where boundaries are drawn and defended to the death.

They also prompt a tidy reversal of discourse ethics. Discourse that functions ethically *within* those boundaries must articulate collectivity inclusively, usually in a way that eventually enacts compromise. Discourse that functions ethically *across* them, however, must articulate an exclusionary collectivity in a way that defends them from the possibility of compromise. The fundamental ethical problem that is created by that ethical split is apparent when we recognize that, whatever communities we might imagine, our reality is that we all live in the same space together--intensely self-interested, increasingly interdependent, and abundantly armed. It is this unimagined and contested space within which we imagine community that, I believe, requires a us to reconceive the ethical practice of dialectic in a way that that does not begin with the exclusion and contention that is inherent in the consent-based metaphor of community.

It seems to me that a good way to reconceptualize collectivity and the relational project of discursive exchange that maintains it is to shift the metaphor we use to locate

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

it, and ourselves within it. The metaphor of community seems to me to be ethically inadequate for the location of collectivity in limited space because of the relations of exclusion and contention that are marked by its boundaries: Communities are fixed *places*, contained by commonality; identity in community is also fixed and contained. People within community share identity that people outside do not, and it is the cooperative project of a community to maintain that distinction. The ethical function of a dialectic of community is eventually to inscribe a place of exlusionary collective identity, a function that I now think may be, at least some of the time, unethical. What if we were to reconceive the ethical function of dialectic in terms of a metaphor that locates discourse and collectivity in *space* rather than *place*? What if we were to abandon the notion that dialectic is a discourse of community for the alternative notion that dialectic is a discourse of journey? In terms of identity, what if were understand our participation in dialectic through the metaphor of traveler rather than the metaphor of resident?

Think of a journey as located in space rather than place. If participation in discourse is understood to be more like traveling than staying home, then dialectic is defined as a process of movement across space rather than as a way of inscribing the boundaries of place. Kathleen Kirby uses language that helps me reconceive both collectivity and identity in these terms: "*Place* seems to assume to set boundaries that one fills to achieve a solid identity. Place settles space into objects" that are themselves are metaphors for an "autonomous ego." By contrast, "space is malleable, a fabric of constantly shifting sites and boundaries" (176). Essentially, "as a metaphorical substrate, space provides the very medium for measuring interconnection and difference, similarity and distance--markers that become important in evaluating the possibilities of coalition or the desirability of separation" (174). Note that in space interconnection and difference are "measured" rather than inscribed, and coalition or separation are evaluated as "possibilities" rather than enforced. In terms that suggest quite precisely a rationale for shifting our metaphor for collectivity from community to journey, and for identity from resident to traveler, Kirby notes that

> Language, like topographic space, can be described as a loose, unrealized network (*langue*) organized by relative distances, proximities, connections, and chasms between terms. Its potentials are activated and actualized only in moments of utterance (*parole*), just as a physical terrain is only realized in moments of traversal (179).

A notion of collectivity that is activated and actualized in transient moments of discursive exchange are transient rather than in centripetal moments of residence suggests to me the shape of the kind of ethical project that I would like a reconceived dialectic to enact.

So what if we were to think of dialectic--the discursive project of rhetorical exchange--as an enactment of a journey rather than a community, as a transitory and somewhat disorienting trip across a space? If travel rather than residence were the metaphor verb that defined for us our participation in a wide variety and levels of cooperative discourses, what would change? For one thing, what Thomas J. Farrell calls "rhetorical culture"--the kind of collectivity constituted in the dialectical process of public discourse itself. Farrell's *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* describes culture as a place, as an imagined community, where "premises of thought are permeable to the interests of others

in an atmosphere of civic friendship and public exposure" (76). Embarked as I am on a journey away from such places, I infer here that discourse that is not contained within this one is located outside the realm of civil sociality. But what if we were to relocate rhetorical culture in the space that separates such imaginary communities, and reconceive the identity of a participant in public discourse as a traveler through it? Edward Said has examined the consequences of this kind of metaphor shift. For him, if identity is imagined in terms residency, or property, or place, "your legitimacy is that this is your domain, which you can describe with *authority*...." By contrast, "the image of the traveler depends not on power but on motion.... Travelers must suspend the claim of customary routine in order to live in new rhythms and rituals." Essentially, "the traveler *crosses over*, traverses territory, and abandons fixed positions, all the time (17)." In more directly ethical terms, Said puts it plainly, "In our wish to make ourselves heard, we tend very often to forget that the world is a crowded place, and that if everyone were to insist on the radical purity or priority of one's own voice, all we would have would be the awful din of unending strife, and a bloody political mess... (*C&I* xxi). This is what happens at the boundaries of a discourse of community, and I think its worth looking for a dialectic that is less intent on drawing them.

Like Said, Mary Louise Pratt, has experimented explicitly with the conceptual possibilities that become available when the notion of traveler becomes an alternative metaphor for social identity, and the metaphor of journey becomes an alternative metaphor for collectivity. This is the metaphorical ground for her concept of "contact zone" which she first articulated in contrast with that of the "safe house." Safe houses are places "where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understanding, temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (40). Such groups are necessary, as is the discourse of insularity and relative intimacy that constitutes and maintains them. This is a discourse of community that inscribes boundaries and works dialectically in a kind of a sorting function that determines inclusion and exclusion. I read this as the discourse of what we might characterize as a reconceived private realm where people with much in common can make collective sense of what they have learned outside the house. Out there, are "spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power..." (34)– spaces that Pratt calls contact zones. This describes, for me, that space in which we must travel that crosses the boundaries of communties, and it suggests that we might do well to relocate our notion of the public there. By traditional definition and practice, dialectic is the discourse of the safe houses we have called communities. We need that, but we also need an alternative dialectic we can use to constitute an alternative collectivity in the shared spaces we increasingly must cross, spaces that the boundaries of consensus and prior commitment to compromise do not and should not circumscribe. I read Hunter's analysis of the failed dialectic of the culture wars as clear evidence of that need.

I'm not yet able to articulate that alternative in terms beyond the metaphorical. Recently, however, a graduate student refined this metaphor of travel in a way that provides me with conceptual resources that I think I can use to do that. In response to readings and discussion on our concept of discourse communities, Rena Ashauer wrote

this :

> In the past, I have most often heard of discourse communities operating in terms of a "bridging" or a joining of members into a unified whole. A *crossing* of difference, however, suggests an agreed-upon meeting which takes place amid a landscape of difference: the difference is maintained and exists all around said point of agreement. Indeed, the act of crossing both defines AND divides common space and implies agency, while a bridge more or less permanently links two separate spaces and exists as a connection *whether or not anyone chooses actually to make the journey*. In bridging, at least one participant must leave his or her originating space, abandoning it for the duration of the joining. In crossing, however, navigation within a *common space* is possible.

In these transient common spaces we might conceive and practice a more ethical dialectic–one that enables people to use their words to transform and transcend, rather than inscribe and defend, the limits of their collectivity.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition. London: Verso, 1991.

Ashauer, Rena. Untitled response essay, October 1994.

Farrell, Thomas J. *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. NY: Basic Books, 1991.

Kirby, Kathleen. "Thinking Through the Boundary: The Politics of Location, Subjects, and Space." *Boundary 2* 20:2 (1993), 173-189.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession 91* (1991), 33-40.

——. "Linguistic Utopias," 49-66. In *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments Between Language and Literature*, ed. Nigel Fablo, Derek Attridge, and Colin McCabe. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987.

Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. NY: Vintage, 1993.

——. "Identity, Authority, and Freedom: The Potentate and the Traveler." *Boundary 2* 21:3 (1994), 1-18.

Swearingen, C. Jan and Diane Mowery. "Ecofeminist Poetics: A Dialogue on Keeping Mind and Body Together," 219-234. In *Composition in Context: Essays in Honor of Donald C. Stewart*, ed. W. Ross Winterowd and Vincent Gillespie. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994.

Vitanza, Victor. "Threes," 196-218. In *Composition in Context: Essays in Honor of Donald C. Stewart*, ed. W. Ross Winterowd and Vincent Gillespie. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994.